

Dr Darrin Baines suggests there are still more questions than answers about the local pharmaceutical services mentioned in "Pharmacy in the Future"

A marriage of convenience

According to Johnny Nash's smash hit from the 1970s, there are more questions than answers. As a closer examination of life around us reveals, this old reggae star was right: the world is full of unresolved riddles.

For example, one of the questions that perplexes many rational beings is why do people get married when they fall in love? If love is about emotions, and marriage is about contracts, why ever mix the two?

Indeed, undying affection may be the horse and legal obligations the carriage, but in this day and age many of us seem to prefer the romantic equivalent of trains and boats and planes, making marriage an outdated, unnecessary institution.

In a similar way, pharmacists have searched for an answer to the question, what should they be? After years of uncertainty, the national plan for pharmacy has detailed the Government's response.

In the future, pharmacists will no longer be the slaves of a national contract which pays them for every script issued and fails to reward innovation, good practice or patient-centred care.

Instead, technicians will emerge from their dispensaries and deliver high-quality, cost-effective prescription services to local people, when they want them, where they want them, how they want them.

To your leaders, comfortably housed in London and the Home Counties, well away from the dispensing bench and the stresses and strains of business life, the national plan for pharmacy is music to their political ears. Pharmacy as a profession is about to receive the recognition it deserves within the NHS, while pharmacy as a trade and business is about to sing its swan song.

Therefore, the future seems clear. Forget about being single; contracts are being prepared and arrangements being made which will sign away your independence and marry you once and for all into your local NHS family.



Jason Bennett

Create your future

Many of the ideas outlined in "Pharmacy for the Future" are currently being made law under the auspices of the Health & Social Care Bill.

The Bill covers a whole range of issues related to pharmacy, from the development of Local Pharmaceutical Services (LPS) pilots to changes in the regulations governing control of entry, from pharmacist prescribing to out-of-area supply.

As with all proposed changes, the Government's plans contain both opportunities and threats for individual pharmacists and the profession as a whole. Among the proposals, LPS pilots have the potential to produce the largest rewards for pharmacy as a profession, but the greatest damage to pharmacy as a trade.

However much they currently love their work, pharmacists who fail to control the direction of their local LPS pilots may eventually find themselves forced into business contracts they wouldn't normally sign.

Therefore, the message to all pharmacists is clear - don't wait to be

told about local plans for LPS pilots, create your own future by learning as much as you can now about the LPS initiative, so you can shape, influence and direct the schemes eventually put into place.

Designing pilots

Currently, your professional leaders and the NHS Executive are holding a behind the scenes debate about the best way in which to operate the LPS scheme. With the general election now over, civil servants will be less inhibited in pushing forward their proposals.

Despite the secrecy, enough information has been published or leaked to make the broad design and direction of the pilots obvious now. Although they will differ in construction, all pilots will have the following key features:

- signed contracts between the local "purchaser" and "providers" of pharmacy services
- performance monitoring systems, with agreed quality indicators for services provided
- specially designed incentives, budgets and remuneration for each provider

- annual reviews of performance by the purchasing agency
- monthly fixed payments for providers, which can be modulated at year-end if performance targets are not met.

As the above suggest, the way in which pharmacy services are contracted, monitored and remunerated will radically change under LPS. Most importantly, their design suggests that, in the future, pharmacists will have to be as knowledgeable about management as they are about medicines in order to practice their trade.

For example, pharmacists will have to know how to negotiate contracts, measure their performance and calculate fair fees for their work.

Independents who fail to acquire the required management technique may find their incomes dropping and businesses suffering, with the result that they are forced either to close or to work for somebody else.

Similarly, employees of pharmacy chains may find their promotions blocked or salaries frozen if they are unable to generate funds

from sources other than dispensing fees.

LPS activities

However well they are designed, LPS pilots will only be as worthwhile as the needs they fulfil. As the profession's leaders want to prove that pharmacy is a valuable profession, much effort is currently being expended on determining what LPS pilots should actually do.

"Pharmacy in the Future" suggests that the following activities will emerge as favourites:

- bettering access to services
- improving medicines usage
- redesigning services around patients
- ensuring high quality care.

In some respects, these activities are not radical or new. For instance, initiatives have already been established to collect unused medicines, supervise methadone consumption, provide pharmaceutical advice to doctors, support medicines taking in nursing homes and involve pharmacists in health promotion.

However, under LPS all pharmacies will – in theory – be able to negotiate specially-designed local contracts which will give them the funds and support required to properly provide these services.

In response, there may be a rapid growth in the number of pharmacies that specialise in the provision of

these services, as they are more rewarding than churning out scripts under the current national contract.

Top tips

For many pharmacists, moving from the current national contract to LPS pilot status will be like progressing from being single to being engaged. Given that engagement is effectively a trial marriage, it is worth knowing what to expect and how to keep your partner happy.

For pharmacists – contractors and employees – considering such a momentous move, here are four tips on how to be part of a successful LPS partnership:

- ask yourself truthfully why you want to be involved in this new union
- find out more about your new partner and what makes them tick
- learn how to communicate with each other and role-play some difficult situations, and
- keep the fun in pharmacy and make sure your relationship bears fruit.

Although successful relationships depend upon how we relate, there are simple ways of making our partners happy with very little effort.

Firstly, don't re-invent yourself, as this isn't sustainable in the longer-term. Instead, only promise to deliver what you can easily provide. For example, if you have lots of methadone patients in your

pharmacy, bid for LPS monies to manage their care.

By recording the advice and time you give these patients, agreeing treatment standards and developing indicators for measuring your performance, you'll be supplying a contractable service.

Similarly, if you have lots of middle class customers concerned about their health, harness their enthusiasm and provide the pharmaceutical services they would like.

In other words, although LPS is new, the services you provide don't have to be new too.

Options for change

Although the first waves of LPS pilots are likely to be conservative in their activities, in the longer term the scheme will radically alter the way pharmacies operate.

Amongst the trends most likely to develop, we may see:

- mergers and acquisitions as community pharmacies try to secure economies of scale
- provision of pharmaceutical services by primary care organisations
- new forms of entrepreneurship developing as pharmacy is taken into the NHS family.

For pharmacists, these trends suggest now is a good time to reassess what they want out of the profession. If pharmacy is your vocation, you should network, promote your

abilities and establish your credentials locally as a leading-edge medicines manager.

For pharmacy owners, if profit is your main motive now may be a good time to expand, to contract or to leave the market altogether. In other words, there are no simple answers, and lots of options to be appraised.

At its best, pharmacy is a rewarding profession that makes a real contribution to the health of the nation. Nevertheless, you can't run a business on emotions.

To help address the commercial worries of pharmacies throughout the country, the profession's leaders should encourage open and honest debate about the consequences of LPS pilots for pharmacy as a business.

Once the evidence for and against the schemes have been weighed, businesses should be able to sing in celebration as LPS status proves to be the opportunity they need to make themselves respected, well rewarded members of their local NHS families.

As Johnny Nash's hit "I can see clearly now – the rain is gone" suggests, once they've overcome the obstacles in their way, NHS community pharmacists may find it's going to be a bright sunny day.

Dr Baines is the director of medM Ltd. Details of the company's workshop on designing LPS pilots are available at www.medm.co.uk.

medm

Create your future

Workshop Programme, Summer and Autumn 2001

Managerial and economic issues in running medicines management projects

15 August, 18 September, 10 October and 14 November 2001

This workshop is designed to help pharmacists, LPCs and NHS bodies to:

- Identify the managerial and economic issues related to medicines management,
- Analyse the various ways in which they may be addressed, and
- Design usable management frameworks that help resolve these problems.

The day will be structured so that participants gain maximum insight into the ways economic and management problems may affect the successful operation of such initiatives.

Economic and managerial issues in designing Local Pharmaceutical Services (LPS) pilots

14 August, 17 September, 9 October and 13 November 2001

The day will be led by the director of medM Ltd, Dr Darrin Baines, who will help participants to:

- To outline a framework for evaluating local needs for pharmaceutical services,
- To analyse various ways in which local pilots may be designed, and
- To identify the issues to be discussed before an LPS application is made.

The workshop will be interactive and allow participants to explore the various LPS options open to them, whilst analysing the pros and cons of the design of different LPS schemes.

Events will be held in Milton Keynes on the dates shown above. Participants may attend on any of the dates listed. Alternatively, workshops may be run in-house for organisations wishing to provide the day locally. For further details of these events, telephone the workshop organiser

on (01908) 671137, email us at info@medm.co.uk, or visit medm.co.uk